

MENEYKES RIVKAH

A Manual of Wisdom and Piety for Jewish Women (pub. ~1581)

Rivkah bas Meir Tiktiner of Prague, d. 1605

Drawn from a 2008 publication, translated by Samuel Spinner
with Introduction and Commentary by Frauke von Rohden

Nun vil ikh di *psukim* nokh kumn un' vil oykh ridn der fun mit eyner *bas Yisroel* un' *bifrat* mit eyner yugnt di zikh nokh nit fil gnit hot – vi zi zikh zol haltin voz on b'langn iz irn *guf* der tzu gihert grosi *chokhmeh*. Vi der *posuk* shprikht “*chakhmes noshim bansoh beysoh.*”¹ Doz meynt den *guf* den heyst er “*beysoh.*”

Oykh gfindn mir eyn “*piyyut*” fun *Yom Kipper* doz er shprikht vi den *bal-habos* der zayn hoyz far visht – doz meynt oykh den *guf*. D'rum shprikht er oyf eyn *isheh*. Zi muz grosi *chokhmeh* broykh'n voz an b'langn iz irin *guf*. *Mah she'eyn ken*,² bay eynm man darf es nit azo zayn, den eyn *isheh* muz, eyn tzayt³ far der andr haltin, der nokh di tzayt iz. Fun dem darf ikh nit fil shraybn, den eyn itlekhi *isheh* veys az zelbert⁴ vol vi zi zikh zol haltn. Zi zol zonst krg⁵ zayn un' shparin. Ober in der tzayt zol zi zikh far zehn doz zi irin *guf* nit far derbt.⁶ Der nokh kent zi zikh nit *koshern*.⁷

D'royf hot *Shlomeh Melekh a"h* g'zagt “*iveyles b'yodeyho tehersenah.*”⁸ Dos meynt azo di narheyt tzu firt ir hoyz mutvilig.⁹ Oyf dos git der *posek* “*kol orem ya'aseh v'da'as.*”¹⁰ Doz iz taytsh: eyn itlikher klugr tut als mit zin un' vitz.

Oykh *darshes* di *Gemore*¹¹ “*yodea tzadik nefesh b'hemto.*”¹² Doz meynt eyn

¹ Proverbs 14:1 – “The wisdom of women builds her house...”

² Hebrew, *mah she'eyn ken* – on the other hand...

³ *Tzayt* – literally “time,” refers specifically to the menstrual period of *niddah*, when there are restrictions placed on her. So *tzayt* would include the days of menstruation and the seven days following.

⁴ *Zelbert* – herself, on her own

⁵ The translator says “prudent.” Is it being read as *klug*?

⁶ *Farderbn* – to harm, injure

⁷ *Koshern zikh* – to make oneself kosher!

⁸ Continuation of Proverbs 14:1 – “...but folly plucks it down with her hands.” Hebrew here says *tehersenu*, “ruins it,” but she gives it as feminine *tehersenah*, “ruins her,” further equating a woman’s home and her body.

⁹ *Mutvilig* – willfully

¹⁰ Proverbs 13:16 – “In everything a prudent person acts with knowledge...”

itlikher frumer Yud der veys voz zayner *b'heymeh* nut; tut *mikol shekeyn*¹³ zayn vayb.

Oykh shraybn unzeri *chakhomim z"l* fil fun den zakhin dz der *ben-odem* zol g'varnt zayn: doz er zayn *guf* zol *shunen*,¹⁴ doz er nisht ungezunds est. Den ven er *chas v'sholem* krank ver; kent er fil *mitzves* nit haltin di er tun kon ven er gezunt iz.

Oykh shraybt der "Maymani"¹⁵ oyf den *posek* "*shomer piv ulshonoy shomer mitzores nafshoy*." ¹⁶ Doz meynt azo der zayn tzung hit far *loshen horeh* un zayn moyl fun ungezunti *akhiles*, doz fil *cholyes chas v'sholem* der fun kumn d'rum. Ret der *posek kefel loshen* "*piv ul'shonoy*" ¹⁷ *mikol sheken* eyn *isheh*.

D'royf hot *Shlomoh Hameylekh a"h* g'zagt "*iveyles b'yadeyho tehersenah*." ¹⁸ Doz meynt di narheynt tzu firt ir hoyz mut vilig. Oyf dem hot *Shlomoh Hameylekh a"h* oykh gizogt "*b'chokhmah yiboneh haboyis uvis 'vunoh yiskonan*"¹⁹ *uv'da'as chadorim yimol'u kol hon yoker v'noyim*." ²⁰

Doz iz taytsh mit der klugheynt vert giboyt doz hoyz. *Ratzoh lomar*²¹ doz meynt oykh *chokhmes haguf*, doz do glaykh iz tzu eynm *boyis*, az ikh fort g'shribn hob, un' mit der far shtendig keyt vert doz on gebreyt. Doz meynt "*chokhmes hanefesh*," doz iz di *neshomeh* vi di *isheh*. Ir *neshomeh* zol bivornen. Un' mit den gutin zin²² vern on g'filt iri kamrin mit eytl geshtlikhi un' virdgi *takhshitim*.²³

¹¹ BT Ketubbot 63a; BT Nedarim 50a.

¹² Proverbs 12:10 – "A righteous man regards the life/soul of his beast..."

¹³ Hebrew, *mikol sheken* – all the moreso

¹⁴ Translated as "take care of" – not certain what Yiddish or Hebrew word שׂוֹן is supposed to be

¹⁵ Maimonides, *Hilkhot De'ot* 4, 15.

¹⁶ Proverbs 21:23, "Whoever guards their mouth and their tongue keeps their soul from troubles."

¹⁷ *Kefel lashon* – duplicative language or pleonasm. In this case, it refers to the fact that "mouth" and "tongue" are both used in this verse. Therefore, according to rabbinic interpretation, they must mean different things because Torah does not tolerate redundancy. Rivkah bas Meir here suggests that the two words are used to suggest that both men and women are included in this aphorism.

¹⁸ Proverbs 14:1; see note 8, above.

¹⁹ Proverbs 24:3, "By wisdom is a house built and by understanding is it established."

²⁰ Proverbs 24:4, in continuation: "And by knowledge shall the chambers be filled with all precious and pleasant riches."

²¹ *Ratzoh lomar* – that is to say... (Hebrew)

Ratzoh lomar ven zi irn guf un' *neshomeh* vert in den gutn *drokhim*,²⁴ firin do vert zi *zoykheh*²⁵ zayn kinder tzu hobn di do vern virdig un' keshtlikh gihaltin zayn min az dos gim gold.²⁶

Oyf doz derf men nit fil *r'iyeh*²⁷ tzu brengn. Oykh lerne mirs²⁸ oyz den *posek* "vaya'as lohem botim,"²⁹ doz iz taytsh, un' er makht zey heyzer. Doz shteyt bay Yokheved un' Miryam "vay'hi ki yor'u ha-m'yaldos es ho-Elohim."³⁰ Doz is taytsh d'rum doz zi *yiras shamayim* in zikh gihat hobn, do hot in *Hashem Yisborakh* zelkhi heyzer g'boyt, doz zi hobn *zoykheh* givezin do fun eyn kumn iz *kohonim*, *leviyim*, un' *melokhim*. D'rum shteyt oykh bay B'tzalel der fun Miryam kumn iz, "vay'malei osoy ruach Elohim b'da'as uvisvuneh uv'chokhmeh."³¹ Doz iz taytsh un' er der filt in den gemit gutes mit zin un' far shtendikeyt un' klukeyt.

Oyf doz shraybt *Reyshis Chokhmeh*³² es zay eyn *ish* oder eyn *isheh*, di do *yiras Hashem* in zikh hot, di iz *zoykheh* doz der *Ruech Hakoydesh* zol oyf ir ruen. D'rum zol zikh eyn itlekhi *isheh* haltin *bikdusheh* uvit'horeh. Az unzeri *chakhomim* shraybn az als an der *ishah* g'legin³³ iz. Az mirs oykh g'findn in der *Froen-bukh* doz fil an der *ishah machshoveh*³⁴ g'legn iz.

Az doz *midresh*³⁵ git in *Ki Sovoy*,³⁶ "borukh pri vit'nekho ufri admoskho."³⁷ Doz iz taytsh di frukht fun daynem boykh vert gibentsht zayn un' di frukht fur dayner erdn. *Hakish*³⁸ pri vaten lifri ha'adomoh. Der posek glaykht di frukht fun den

²² *Zin* – sense, not sons

²³ *Takhshitim* – "jewels, jewelry" (Hebrew)

²⁴ *Derakhim* – "ways, paths" (Hebrew)

²⁵ *Zokheh* or *zokhah* – "worthy, meriting;" *Zoykheh zayn* = "to merit" (Hebrew)

²⁶ *Gim gold* – pure gold. In at least one Manger poem, we've seen this as *ging gold*.

²⁷ *R'iyeh* – evidence or proofs, from Hebrew *r'iyot*.

²⁸ *Mirs* or *mirsh*? A variant form of *mir*, "we"? Or a contraction of *mir es*?

²⁹ Exodus 1:21 – "[And because the midwives feared God] He made them houses."

³⁰ Exodus 1:21 – "And because the midwives feared God..." Midrash equates the midwives Shifrah and Puah with Yokheved and Miriam.

³¹ Exodus 35:31. "And he has filled [Betzelel] with the spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, and in knowledge...." Midrash holds Betzelel to be the grandson or great grandson of Miriam.

³² *Reishit Chokhmah* I, p. 646, sec. 72.

³³ *Gelegin* – to depend

boykh tu den frukht tzu der erdn. Dos meynt azo ven eyn gertner vil hobn dos zayn gortn zol guti *peyres* trogn oder guti vol gishmake krayter zolin vaksn, do muz er zikh gor vol miyan³⁹ un grosn fleysh on leygn. Un' muz di *karka*⁴⁰ gor vol oys akern⁴¹ un' muz di beyze vurtzeln ali oys grobn doz gor keyni do blaybt.

Ven nu⁴² di *karka* gantz rayn iz, ersht muz er den zamn gor rayn oys kloybn dz keyn ander korin d'runter iz do.⁴³ Nokh ziet⁴⁴ er zayn gortn gor rayn.

Azo iz eyn *isheh* ven zi vil frumeh zelige kinder hobn di in guts dinst un' forkht zolin giratn, do muz zi zikh gor vol *mesaken*⁴⁵ zayn mit iri *maysim toyvim* un' zol zikh fun beyze *maysim marchik*⁴⁶ zayn.

Vi vol zi ali vegn *mechuyav*⁴⁷ iz, dokh in der tzayt azo bald az zi heybt on tzu trogin. Zol zi *nizhar*⁴⁸ zayn mer az eyn andr mol, doz zi keyn lign zol zogn odr *r'khiles*⁴⁹ traybn. Oykhn zol zi nisht *big'niveh*⁵⁰ nemn ven es glaykh eyn *davar muet*⁵¹ iz, den dos kind mekht *chas v'chalileh* der nokh giratn. Eyn zelikheh *isheh* zol zikh eytl⁵² *maysim toyvim* on nemn, un' zol gern herin tzu lernn un' tzu *droshes*⁵³ geyn. Do verin di kindr azo giratn.

Az mir gefindn in unzer heyligeh *toyreh*, bay unzer muter Rivkeh der bay shteyt gishribn, *vayisrotzetzu habonim b'kirboh*.⁵⁴ Do makht Rashi den *p'shat*⁵⁵: ven zi ging far *avoydeh zoreh*,⁵⁶ do hot Esav aroys givolt. Ven zi iz gangen far *bosey k'neses* un *bosey midroshes*,⁵⁷ do hot Yankev aroys givolt. Nu⁵⁸ vert *m'suretz*⁵⁹

³⁴ *Machshavah* – “thought” (Hebrew)

³⁵ Devarim Rabbah 3.5.

³⁶ The Torah portion called “Ki Tavo,” beginning at Deuteronomy 26:1. *Inter alia*, this portion lays out the ceremony of first fruits.

³⁷ Deuteronomy 28:4: “Blessed shall be the fruit of your body, and the fruit of your earth...” Note that “your” in this Hebrew verse is in masculine.

³⁸ Hebrew, *hakish*. To deduce. The translator renders this as “draw a parallel.” Rivkah bas Meir seems to be saying, “deduce what meaning is in this parallelism between fruit of the womb and fruit of the earth.

³⁹ Have not determined what this word, מַאֲדָה, is. The full clause is translated as “he has to work hard and with great diligence.”

⁴⁰ *Karka* – “ground” (Hebrew)

⁴¹ *Akern* – to plow.

⁴² *Nu*, probably related to *nun*, “now,” rather than the Eastern European Yiddish “nu?”

⁴³ The gardener has to make sure seeds of no other grain are present because of the prohibition on sowing mixed seeds.

verin vu Esav her kumn iz. Doz Yankev frum iz givezn, d'rum dos ir *kavoneh* iz givezn oyf der *toyreh* un' *maysim toyvim*. Un' az Esav ibl⁶⁰ giratin iz, hot es di *tzodeykes*⁶¹ far zint⁶² doz zi far *avoydeh zoreh* fir gagn iz. Vi vol keyn *kavoneh* d'ruf hot gihat, nokh hot zi nit zelin der fir far ibr geyn doran, hot's di *tzodeykes* vos far zindikt.

Az di *g'moreh*,⁶³ oykh git⁶⁴ eyner zol ihr geyn far eyn *beys zones* un' zol nit geyn far *beys avoydeh zoreh*. Mir lernen es oys den *posek* “*al tikrav el pesach beysoh*.”⁶⁵ Do *drashet* di *g'moreh* oyf *avoydeh zoreh*. Dos iz taytsh: nit do zolst ginehn⁶⁶ tzu der tir fun hoyz der *avoydeh zoreh*. Vi vol unzeri *mefarshim*⁶⁷ makhin fil *teyrutzim* d'royf di ikh do her derf nit tzu shraybn.

⁴⁴ *Zien* – to sow.

⁴⁵ *M'taken*. To correct, repair, heal, be or make correct. (Hebrew) She must “improve herself.”

⁴⁶ *Marchik*. To make distant, withdraw, separate. (Hebrew)

⁴⁷ *M'chuyav*. Obligated. (Hebrew) She is always obligated to engage in good deeds and distance herself from evil.

⁴⁸ *Nizhar*. Careful, cautious. (Hebrew)

⁴⁹ *R'khilut*. Gossip, rumors. (Hebrew)

⁵⁰ *G'nivah*. Theft. (Hebrew)

⁵¹ *Davar mu'at*. A small thing; a trifle. (Hebrew)

⁵² *Eytl*. Don't know what this is. Maybe a variant of *etlekh*?

⁵³ *Drashot*, “sermons, teachings.” (Hebrew)

⁵⁴ Genesis 25:22, about Rebecca's pregnancy with twins: “the children struggled (ran around) inside her.”

⁵⁵ *P'shat*. The plain meaning of a text. (Hebrew)

⁵⁶ *Avodah zarah*. Foreign worship, meaning idolatry or places of non-Jewish worship. (Hebrew)

Reb Irwin's Many Language Notes

The orthography is not uniform. As a Hebrew scholar, she often spells Yiddish words with no vowels at all, as similar-sounding words would be spelled in Hebrew. For instance, she typically spells *der* as *dr*, *doz* as *dz*, *far* as *fr*.

She also uses the free-standing vowel indicators of Torah as her go-to vowels – *vav*, *yud*, *heh*. So, for instance, in the word *grosi*, “large,” she represents the vowel /o/ with a Hebrew *vav* (ו) rather than an *alef+kometz* (אָ). She indicates the final vowel of *grosi* with a *yod*, but elsewhere ends *gute* with a *heh*.

Rivkah bas Meir does sometimes use *alef* and *ayin* as vowels, as we see in later standard Yiddish. For instance we see an *alef* the word *nokh*; perhaps her pronunciation of that word was *nakh*, like German *nach*. We also regularly see an *ayin* in the word *darf*, although it could refer to a sound that is not /a/ at all, but maybe an /e/ or /ü/ – *derf*, similar to German *dürf*. Elsewhere, We see an *ayin* for the word *az*, pretty clearly representing the sound /a/ but elsewhere *ayin* expresses an /e/ as in *er*, *es*, *est*....

So perhaps there is nothing systematic to find here at all; she is writing in a time free of a system; she is transliterating her spoken Yiddish into Hebrew letters, and variability happens in the same way that Americans transliterating Hebrew into Roman letters typically do so differently from each other and inconsistently on their own.

Rivkah bas Meir uses the letter *shin* to represent both the sound /š/ and the sound /s/. So an unsuspecting reader might pronounce *grosi* as *groši*.

Complex verbs, i.e. those containing a stem and a particle [ask Lisa what this is called] are not written as one word. So, for instance, *farzeyn* is written *fr zehn*.

There is also vocabulary that feels very German – the use of *shprikht* (cf. German “spricht”) and *broykht* (German *braucht*) which fell out of common use in later Eastern Yiddish. She also uses relative pronouns that are declined for case and gender as in German. For instance, *vert zi*

⁵⁷ *Batei k'neset*. Synagogues. *Batei midrashot*. Jewish study-houses. (Hebrew)

⁵⁸ Probably the equivalent of *nun* – “now.”

⁵⁹ *M'turatz*. Explained; interpreted. (Hebrew)

⁶⁰ *Ibl* – evil.

⁶¹ *Tzadeket*. Righteous or saintly woman; feminine form of *tzadik*. (Hebrew)

⁶² *Farzinen* – to sin.

⁶³ BT Avodah Zarah 17a.

⁶⁴ *Oykh gut* – it is better that...

⁶⁵ Proverbs 5:8. “Come not near the door of her house.”

⁶⁶ *Ginehn*. To go near. Cf. German *nähe*.

⁶⁷ *M'farshim*. Commentators. (Hebrew)

zoykheh zayn kinder tzu hobn di do vern virdig un' keshtlikh, “She will merit having children who (*di*) are worthy and precious,” where in standard later Eastern European Yiddish we would expect *vos*. She uses the past tense *ging* for “went” in contrast to later Yiddish *iz gegangen*.

There is also plenty of German syntax, placing verbs at the end of clauses. We will notice some of those as we go.

In my transliteration of the Hebrew letters, I’ve tried to follow her spelling so that you all can see how different it is from what we are used to. Sometimes I supplied additional vowels to make the reading clear, but I did so inconsistently.